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ABSTRACT

Whereas Gestalt Therapy purports to apply the principles of Gestalt psychology to psychotherapeutic situations, its emphasis upon the here-and-now and upon sensations as distinct from meanings is directly contrary to the spirit and assumptions of Gestalt theory as developed by Max Wertheimer and others. When Gestalt therapy does succeed, it is by escaping its intended focus. This is not to argue that there is no therapeutic potential in a convergence of forces within the individual upon what can be called the here-and-now. Such a focus should, however, be an open gateway to past and future. The specious present has its maximum therapeutic value when it enables the individual, in some accommodated sense, to step outside of time and into eternity. (Author/JLL)

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GESTALT THERAPY AND THE SPECIOUS PRESENT

by

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Gestalt psychology is not just a footnote to a science. It entails a viewpoint and method radically different from those of atomistic systems. Therefore, when a form of psychotherapy is called Gestalt Therapy, we are entitled to expect that it will embody the essential and differentiating features of that school of thought developed by Wertheimer and his colleagues.

There is a psychotherapeutic system with this name, developed by the late Frederick "Fritz" Perls. More of the genius and comportment of Gestalt psychology have been reflected in Carl Rogers' client-centered system, I have contended, than in what is called Gestalt Therapy. The present effort will argue that, in particular, the preoccupation with and methods of approaching "the here and now" in Gestalt Therapy are directly at odds with the spirit of Gestalt theory and similar forms of holistic thinking. This case will be made by examining both the nature of time (objective and psychological) and the premises of holistic psychology, all of this in relation to what is done in such techniques as present-centeredness and the continuum of awareness.

A good beginning-place is the relationship of our tenses to reality. The past is unreal in the sense that it is gone. It may leave neurological and other residues, but their presence "now" saves them from non-entity. The future is unreal in that it is not here yet. Indeed, that there will

even be a future, personal or not, is an assumption. The present is not real because it has no duration. If you ask people what they are doing "now," the answers will involve varying lengths of time. Sample answers: "I'm studying calculus this semester." "I'm waiting for my friend to meet me here." "I'm answering your question." Whatever one regards himself as doing, some time elapses in the doing of it. In the realm of pure mathematics, at least, for any given interval there is a shorter interval. To have an interval at all is to have duration--that is, a "present" which also contains, as it were, a past and a future. Only when we get to no duration, no interval, can we speak strictly of "the present," and then we are left with no temporal passage, no possible activity, no present to refer to.

Yet, everybody believes in the reality of "now." All attempts to specify it in words are circular and beg the question. The reality of the present is psychological. It relates to goals and to ongoing activity. Since there are goals within goals within goals, there can be a present within a present within a present. In objective terms, then, how much time one includes in "now" is a function of his activity and his state of mind. As James wrote, "it is only as entering into the living and moving organization of a much wider tract of time that the strict present is apprehended at all."¹

Integration is a primary ingredient of mental health. If, as noted, there are goals within goals within goals, it should not be surprising that an effective psychological integration of long temporal periods is closely associated with mental health. In General Semantics, man is described as a time-binding animal because he consciously and systematically can relate

past to future. Man appears to be unique in being conscious of time in the abstract, of mortality, in regretting that, as Omar Khayyam's Rubaiyat put it, "The Bird of Time has but a little way to fly--and Lo! the Bird is on the Wing."

Psychoanalysis recognizes that what James called "the specious present" is rooted in the past. Thus, the patient is encouraged to resurrect critical incidents from his childhood to consciousness. Ahistorical approaches to therapy argue that past causes cannot operate in the present. (No, but they can certainly help to explain it!) Gestalt Therapy, especially, seizes upon the passing moment as if it stood on more solid metaphysical ground than all else. In a lecture, the founder of the system declared,

In my lectures in Gestalt therapy, I have one aim only: to impart a fraction of the meaning of the word now. To me, nothing exists except the now. Now = experience = awareness = reality. The past is no more and the future not yet. Only the now exists.²

(We have argued herein that it does not.) Perls went on to define the awareness continuum as "discovering and becoming fully aware of each actual experience."³ Naranjo has described the technique of present-centeredness. He cites as the first two injunctions of Gestalt therapy:

1. Live now. Be concerned with the present rather than with past or future.
2. Live here. Deal with what is present rather than with what is absent.⁴

One thinks of Khayyam's hedonism again:

Ah, take the cash in hand and waive the rest;
Nor heed the music of a distant drum!⁵

One can readily imagine someone so distracted by the potential woes and calamities of tomorrow that he could not enjoy the beautiful sunset or the

smile of a friend that is available right now. Yet, it hardly follows that we should give no thought to the future. Dinner will not cook itself. The bills will not pay themselves. The automobile will not repair itself. Nor should I ignore the cries of a loved one in anguish because she is not in this room. To a large extent, our human character consists in our ability to transcend the "here and now" wherein Naranjo bids us exclusively live.

John O. Stevens, a student of Perls, developed some of his ideas and approaches in a book titled Awareness: Exploring, Experimenting, Experimenting.⁶ Stevens, too, hails the non-existent present as all: "Our idea of the future, like our conception of the past, is based on our understanding of the present. Past and future are our guesses about what preceded the present moment and our guesses about what will follow."⁷ Is our understanding of the past indeed based upon our perception of the present, or is it more nearly the other way around? Paradoxically, duration and flow are part of what Stevens asks us to include in our awareness exercises. It is a contradiction in terms to speak of duration and flow within the present. Stevens describes communication within, communication with others, fantasy journeys, pairs, group activities, and art, movement, and sound. Part of "communication within" is "letting go of the past." "Some people are so burdened with the past, and so involved in their memories, that they have very little involvement with the present," declares Stevens. True, but, as a reductio ad absurdum, contemplate what would be the involvement with the "present" (which, remember again, is only a psychological construct) of a person who had successfully cut all ties with, erased all memories of, the past or had no residue from any past by which to be guided. How intelligently and realistically could he perceive his situation?

Newborn babes are not noted for their wisdom and efficiency!

A recent book by William R. Passons summarizes Gestalt approaches in counseling. Passons proposes that "the past and the future are rooted in the now."⁸ Really? If the future is rooted in the present, causality is flowing in the conventional direction. If the past is rooted in the present, the direction has been reversed. Further, the point of reversal would always be the present. Poetic, perhaps, but hardly a tenable world-view! How long does "now" last? According to Passons, it "is over in a flash..."⁹ and we have a series of these infinitesimally small "nows." How long does a flash last? It is a brief period. How brief? If it is a period at all, it cannot be ontologically "now," as has been discussed. Instead of positing a series of flashes, why not simply say that the present is only a psychological reality? Perls has written that "all that you can be aware of--must be in the present."¹⁰ Really? The star that I am now looking at might have exploded a thousand years ago.

Passons comments that one can only change now. "He cannot redo his past or change that which he has not experienced, the future."¹¹ This statement, too, must be questioned. Certainly, one cannot alter the past outside of science fiction. To assume any causality and continuity, however, is to assume that we can change our next moment by what we do this moment, our tomorrow by our today. As has been noted, time is a continuous flow; it does not really break into "moments."

So much for some general formulations of Gestalt therapy about the present. Let us examine some techniques advocated for implementing them. One cited by Passons and others is attention to "your now." The client is urged to put his awareness into a series of sentences beginning, "Now, I'm

aware of..." and "Here and now, I am..." Each sentence, thus, places the client in a new 'now,' not necessarily related to the others. Such disjunction is encouraged by the procedure, since each temporal specification comes as a distinction from the previous one. "Now, I am..."

All that has been said about "now" can be said about "here." Where are its boundaries? Awareness of the body is usually encouraged in procedures of Gestalt therapy. The client might be asked to feel his overall size and the amount of space he occupies. (Note the identification of self with body.) He or she might be asked to stand in front of a full-length mirror and contemplate what it reports. One is to be aware of bodily sensations, movements, bodily processes. All of this is usually described in such phrases as "getting in touch with the self." Here, again, the Self = Body formula.

A number of psychologists have directly or indirectly questioned the kind of here-and-now delineation of selfhood that has been described herein. The late Thomas H. Howells probably did this as directly and as compellingly as anyone. He wrote that "selfhood is essentially a social affair, includes much that is outside of the skin."¹² Specifically, he called the self an action-pattern. In physics (in which science Howells held a degree), a thing "is" where it acts. The concept of action at a distance has been given up. Thus, a self is wherever and whenever it is having influence. If I am reading Plato and understanding him, then he is, not just poetically but physically and literally, in my living room now. Howells suggested that "Happiness and appreciation of life is proportionate to our harmony with (adjustment to) the spatially and temporally more-inclusive action program of Nature."¹³ He said in the concluding paragraph

of his first book, "The greatest calamity of our scientific age is that learned man has erred in diagnosis of his own disease. His pain is not in his belly or his glands but in his Cosmos."¹⁴ The Gestalt exercises, however, bid us look, as it were, to our bellies and our glands. They are missing the whole point (pun intended).

Andras Angyal gave us further reasons for not equating reality or mental health with here-and-now. From a clinician's standpoint, there is often no satisfactory way to determine what are the forces presently operating in a client's life except by looking into his history. In this way, moreover, the present can be viewed in an evolutionary perspective. Angyal has stressed that an individual life is a total process. To grasp this total process, we must understand that today is an artificial segment. Indeed, this holist characterized personality as a time Gestalt.¹⁵ A song is a familiar example of a Gestalt that can only be comprehended and appreciated over a temporal span. Here, then, is a holist whose counsel was directly opposed to the here-and-now mystique. Adler wrote, "Life demands the solution of the problems of society, and thus all human behavior always points to the future even when it builds with material taken from the past."¹⁶ We must, then, understand ourselves in terms of where we are going. Jung similarly wrote,

A man is only half understood when we know how everything in him came into being. If that were all, he could just as well have been dead years ago. As a living being he is not understood, for life does not have only a yesterday, nor is it explained by reducing today to yesterday. Life also has a tomorrow, and today is understood only when we can add to our knowledge of what was yesterday the beginnings of tomorrow.¹⁷

Cottle and Klineberg have published a study consisting of explorations of time in human experience.¹⁸ Far from glorifying the "specious present,"

they present the capacity for temporal integration as man's crowning glory. They note that the chimpanzee is handicapped in that he seems unable to anticipate coming events unless the relevant stimuli are present. The capacity to foresee (to a point) future events in the absence of relevant stimuli appears to develop only in human beings. Distinctly human achievements are due to man's ability to represent things symbolically and thereby bring actual events from the past and hypothetical ones from the future into consciousness. "Underlying this distinctively human reality is a person's prodigious capacity for manipulating symbols and creating images, for transforming the physical contours of present experience into symbolic conceptions, and for linking them with images of the past and the future."¹⁹

To recap the argument: Whatever encourages people to focus on the non-existent "present" and to downgrade past and future is at variance with the nature of things and with the premises of Gestalt psychology. But, as we have seen, recommendations of such writers on Gestalt therapy as John O. Stevens, Frederick S. Perls, Claudio Naranjo, and William R. Passons do encourage a here-and-now intellectual and emotional focus. Thus, they are missing a major point of Gestalt psychology and flying in the face of the realities of man's mental health needs.

This is not to argue that there is no therapeutic potential in a convergence of forces within the individual upon what, words failing us, we can call the here-and-now. Such a focus should be, however, an open gateway to past and future. Consider the saying: "The man who knows what room he is in, is not in full possession of his soul." The thrust of this maxim is directly opposed to exercises such as "Now, I am aware of...." The specious present has its maximum therapeutic value when it enables us,

in some accommodated sense, to step outside of time and into eternity. Something of the sort may happen as one contemplates beauty, whether contrived by nature or by man. We only escape our slavery to time's arrow when the cutting edge of consciousness takes us into the timeless.

¹William James, Psychology (New York: Premier Books, 1963), p. 252.

²Frederick S. Perls, lecture, Atlanta Workshop in Gestalt Therapy, 1966.

³Ibid.

⁴Claudio Naranjo, "Present-Centeredness: Technique, Prescription, and Ideal," in Joen Fagan and Irma L. Shepherd, eds., Gestalt Therapy Now (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), p. 49.

⁵Edward Fitzgerald, trans., Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam (Garden City, New York: Garden City Publishing Co.), p. 46.

⁶John O. Stevens, Awareness: Exploring, Experimenting, Experiencing (Moab, Utah: Real People Press, 1971).

⁷Ibid., p. 7.

⁸William R. Passons, Gestalt Approaches in Counseling (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1975), p. 22.

⁹Ibid., p. 22.

¹⁰F. S. Perls, Ego, Hunger, and Aggression (New York: Vintage Books, 1947), p. 32.

¹¹Passons, op. cit., p. 46.

¹²Thomas H. Howells, Know Thyself as God (Escondido, Calif.: Self-published, 1967), p. 26.

¹³Ibid., p. 141.

¹⁴Thomas H. Howells, Hunger for Wholeness (Denver: World Press, 1940), p. 303.

¹⁵Andras Angyal, Foundations for a Science of Personality (New York: Commonwealth Fund, 1941), pp. 343-353.

¹⁶Alfred Adler, Social Interest: a Challenge to Mankind (New York: Capricorn Books, 1964), p. 110.

¹⁷C. G. Jung, "On the Psychology of the Unconscious," in R. F. C. Hull, trans., Collected Works of C. G. Jung, V. 7 (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1966), p. 46.

¹⁸Thomas J. Cottle and Stephen L. Klineberg, The Present of Things Future (New York: Free Press, 1974).

¹⁹Ibid., p. 9.